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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/HARDING

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TAGS: PREL PGOV PTER LE SY

SUBJECT: DEFMIN MURR BELIEVES NASRALLAH MISCALCULATED BUT
INABILITY TO BACK DOWN DANGEROUS

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Murr believes that Hassan Nasrallah realizes that he miscalculated regarding the determination of the Siniora cabinet, the fortitude of the LAF, the attitude of the Sunnis, and the attitude of the Christians. But, unable to back down and maintain his appearance of invincibility to his followers, Nasrallah is likely to resort to more dangerous methods now to bring "victory" to his followers. While expecting that central Beirut will not fall prey to violent demonstrations in coming days, Murr predicts Hizballah-Aoun attempts to shut down the country economically. He claimed to have contingency plans in place to rescue PM Siniora and his ministers, should that be necessary, as well as protect the Embassy. Murr dismissed rumors of declarations of martial law or the potential for a military coup d'etat. But he predicted a lengthy, worrying crisis accompanied by waves of violence provoked by Syrian-sponsored terrorists. End summary.

NASRALLAH'S FOUR MISCALCULATIONS

¶2. (C) In a one-on-one meeting with the Ambassador on the evening of 12/8, Murr (wincing while he walked and claiming that recent surgery to extract more shrapnel from the 7/12/05 assassination attempt against him explains his much-remarked upon absence from informal cabinet meetings at the Grand Serail) said that Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah's unusually belligerent speech the night before stemmed from Nasrallah's recognition that he had made four miscalculations: Nasrallah counted on quick collapse of the Siniora cabinet, quick collapse of the Lebanese Armed Forces, large mobilization of pro-Syrian and pro-Aoun Christians, and large mobilization of pro-Syrian Sunnis. All proved to be faulty predictions.

NASRALLAH'S BELLIGERENT SPEECH OFFENDS
EVEN PRO-SYRIAN SUNNIS, AOUNISTS

¶3. (C) None of this materialized, Murr argued, and Nasrallah is now angry and desperate. Yet Nasrallah's 12/7 speech was curiously counterproductive, as its threatening language make it "political suicide" for pro-Syrian Sunnis like Omar Karami, who would be a natural ally of Hizballah in an effort to kick Fouad Siniora out of the Grand Serail, to associate himself with the current demonstrations. While

Michel Aoun (who immediately praised Nasrallah's speech) will "never wake up from his fantasy," Aounists, too, are becoming disaffected with the direction Nasrallah is taking them. Murr claimed that the Armenian Tashnaq party, with two deputies, is already in negotiations with March 14 forces about dropping their parliamentary alliance with Aoun's bloc, and the Tashnaq has stayed out of the Riad Solh Square demonstrations. Nasrallah's claims of a cross-sectarian campaign against an illegitimate cabinet are looking increasingly hollow, Murr noted.

NASRALLAH MORE DANGEROUS,
AS HE CANNOT LOSE THIS BATTLE

¶4. (C) The trouble, Murr said, is that Hizballah's miscalculation is likely to make the situation more dangerous, not less. If Nasrallah backs down, he loses credibility. He promised his followers a victory against Siniora's cabinet, and he cannot maintain his air of invincibility if his fails now. Nasrallah cannot permit decline of his authority and prestige, so he will promote chaos to disguise his miscalculations. Even though he will have to rely increasingly on one-color Shia demonstrators, Nasrallah will try to shut down the country economically, probably starting Monday. Murr did not expect the mass rally called for Sunday to turn violent, "but you never know." Instead, the violence will be designed to break out (as it has so far) elsewhere, where Sunnis or Druse and Shia come into contact with each other. Nasrallah will work to see that more violent incidents occur, but in ways where Hizballah does not appear directly responsible. Murr predicted that Hizballah would use the Sunday rally to organize rolling sit-ins and flying demonstrations aimed at

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crippling the economy as a way to replace the tool of mass demonstrations that cannot be sustained indefinitely. Nasrallah will also, Murr said (echoing what others have said) soon order Shia civil servants to walk off their jobs.

CONFIDENCE THAT LAF CAN PROTECT
CABINET WHEN DEBATING TRIBUNAL

¶5. (C) While claiming that the army was approaching the end of its ability to keep the calm because of physical fatigue and exhaustion of supplies, Murr nonetheless expressed confidence that the LAF would be able to maintain order on Tuesday 12/12, when the cabinet is expected to meet to approve the Special Tribunal for Lebanon documents. Asked about the sensitivity of the day -- the one-year anniversary of the assassination of Gibran Tueni (who, coincidentally, was once married to Murr's sister) -- Murr said that he recommended to his niece Nayla Tueni (who has taken on the role of family spokesman regarding her murdered father) that a different Orthodox church be used for the memorial mass, to keep March 14 supporters away from central Beirut and the Hizballah-Aoun demonstrators. Responding to the Ambassador's comments that GOL officials saw the March 14 attendees at the memorial mass as protection for the cabinet, Murr preferred relying on the army, not March 14 "human shields," to protect the cabinet ministers, which he thought the army could do. The Ambassador asked whether March 8 demonstrators, a mere two or three blocks from the cabinet hall, wouldn't see a Tuesday cabinet session on the tribunal as an unacceptable provocation and thus an irresistible target for trouble-making, Murr responded, "trust me; we are ready."

(UNSPECIFIED) CONTINGENCY PLANS
TO RESCUE SINIORA, CABINET

¶6. (C) Asked by the Ambassador what the LAF contingency plans were, should the Hizballah-Aoun demonstration overrun

the cabinet hall or the Grand Serail, Murr said that LAF commandos were prepared to extract Siniora and his ministers.

He added that, while there was no indication of any Hizballah-Aoun targeting against the U.S. Embassy, the LAF also had contingency plans to protect our facilities. The Ambassador asked about UNIFIL back-up support, an option Murr said was neither necessary nor desirable, given how it would then make UNIFIL, the deployment of which passed the cabinet with Shia support, appear partisan and thus fair game for attacks.

¶7. (C) The Ambassador asked whether the LAF, with Shia officers and soldiers part of the confessionally mixed units, would really use lethal power to prevent Shia masses from physically attacking Siniora and the ministers. He noted with concern LAF Commander Michel Sleiman's statement that the army would remain "equal distance from both sides." While the statement sounded reasonable in terms of keeping opposing demonstrations from clashing, it also suggested that the army would stand aside if GOL facilities, considered in the hands of March 14, were attacked by Hizballah-Aoun demonstrators. Murr shook his head. "The army will protect the government," he insisted; "that's the first job of the army." Pressing, the Ambassador said that he would expect that Hizballah would order Shia officers and soldiers to leave the army first, to demoralize and destabilized the LAF in advance of any assault on the Grand Serail. Murr expressed confidence that most Shia would not leave the army, especially as Nabih Berri will quietly tell his Shia followers, whom Murr claimed to be the bulk of Shia in the army, to stay put. "Nabih doesn't want to split the army."

NO PLANS FOR MARTIAL LAW,
OR MILITARY COUP D'ETAT

¶8. (C) The Ambassador asked Murr about rumors circulating in Lebanon that include versions regarding the declaration of martial law and even the creation by LAF Commander Michel Sleiman of a military government that would serve during a transitory phase until new legislative elections were held. Murr chuckled, claiming that none of the rumors were accurate. PM Siniora, he revealed, had indeed talked with him about a contingency plan to declare a state of emergency, should the situation get out of hand. This would permit the

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LAF to impose and enforce curfews and take other measures to restore public order. But this step has two problems, Murr argued, that make it unattractive. First, under Article 65 of the constitution, it would require two-thirds of the cabinet to agree, and organizing and carrying out cabinet meetings in such a situation where one needs to consider seriously imposition of martial law would probably be difficult. Second, given that the pro-Syrians and Aoun have declared the cabinet illegitimate, the demonstrators would probably disregard a state of emergency in any case or see it as an excuse to escalate their actions. Murr brushed off the Ambassador's questions about a potential military coup d'etat, saying "it won't happen." The Ambassador noted that some people are talking seriously that such a possibility is under consideration by some close to Sleiman. "Not true," Murr insisted.

WORRIED THAT CRISIS WILL BE LONG,
WORSENED BY SYRIAN-SPONSORED TERRORISTS

¶9. (C) The Ambassador asked Murr how he expected the crisis to evolve and be resolved. It will get far worse before it gets better, Murr said, and any solution "will not be easy and will not be quick." If March 14 remains united in opposing a blocking minority to March 8-Aoun forces in the cabinet, then Syria will order its allies to provoke chaos in the country. Murr expressed deep worry that a

Syrian-sponsored al-Qaida operative will set off a bomb in Riad Solh Square, provoking Shia outrage and rampages throughout Lebanon. This will lead to waves of violence, he said, which could be intensified by other Syrian-sponsored suicide bombers. Murr urged that the international community send a message to Syria that it will be held responsible for any terrorist attacks in Lebanon, given that Syria has actively recruited and facilitated movement of al-Qaida operatives to Lebanon.

FELTMAN